

Quality Improvement in education: Postgraduate Certificate in Advanced Practice in Veterinary Nursing

Name of initiative: Postgraduate Certificate in Advanced Practice in Veterinary Nursing
Initiative start date: September 2017
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Introduction

The Advanced Practice in Veterinary Nursing (APVN) programme was initially conceptualised due to my belief that evidence-based veterinary nursing (EBVN) and quality improvement (QI) was not always consistently or comprehensively taught during pre-registration veterinary nursing (VN) training, due to the range of different pre-registration qualification pathways available. As an individual with a personal and professional interest in these topics, I believed that they provide important skills that all VN professionals should have to deliver good patient outcomes and to be able to constantly improve and evolve with the ever-developing science of veterinary nursing.

As a lecturer at the University of Glasgow, I was lucky enough to be able to take my ideas forward in a more formal way and I conceptualised and designed the postgraduate (PG) APVN programme. This is a 3-year part-time master's (MSc) programme that has been specifically designed to allow VNs to continue to work while they study. The first year of this programme is a PG Certificate (PG Cert) which has a strong focus on EBVN and QI to ensure that students learn some foundational skills in these areas from the very start of their PG education journey.

The PG Cert consists of 3 x 20 credit courses:

1. Research and Evidence Based Veterinary Nursing (REBVN)
2. Developing Evidence Based Practice Through Reflection (DEBPTR)
3. Quality Improvement in Veterinary Nursing (QIVN)

Aims

My aim for the programme was to provide VNs from all professional backgrounds the opportunity to participate in postgraduate education and to inspire them to become agents of change within their practices. I wanted them to have a more rounded understanding of what they could achieve within their roles and to provide a range of skills and tools to support the implementation of real-world improvements in their practice.

Actions

The PG Cert is designed to teach a range of skills that will help students to become QI champions within their practice. Due to the range of experience students join us with, we start by introducing everyone to the relevant fundamental underpinning knowledge first, with skills being developed

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further as their learning continues. Each course complements the content of the other courses and introduces a different aspect of QI to the students.

1. 'REBVN' introduces the theoretical and practical concepts of research and evidence using relevant examples from veterinary nursing/medicine. Students are taught about the different research approaches used, and develop skills in research utilisation through finding, accessing and critically evaluating published evidence. These skills are applied practically as the students use the existing evidence base to develop their own PICO research question which they then answer in the form of a *Veterinary Evidence Knowledge Summary*. We introduce the students to the many resources made available to them by RCVS Knowledge and encourage them to utilise the critical analysis templates when creating their Knowledge Summary.
2. 'DEBPTR' teaches theoretical frameworks of reflective practice and supports students to develop practical skills in personal reflection with respect to their learning and professional development. The different barriers to reflection are explored and the students learn mechanisms for overcoming these barriers. The important role of reflection within evidence-based practice (EBP) and techniques for implementing EBP are also explored to provide a practice context to the benefits of reflection. The students apply their learning by writing a reflective narrative that helps them to identify a professional learning need. They then address this learning need through conducting a literature review of their topic to synthesise this into an evidence-based protocol that could be implemented in their workplace. Importantly, the barriers to implementing EBP are explored and recommendations for practice are made based on how to overcome these in the students' own unique practice context.
3. 'QIVN' develops students' knowledge of the key concepts underlying QI and clinical governance (CG) in veterinary practice. Students learn skills that can be directly applied to practice including, how to perform audits, monitor performance and outcomes in their clinical environments, positively influence practice culture, and how these skills can be demonstrated if their practice undergoes accreditation or awards assessment. The students are introduced to RCVS Knowledge QI, SAVSNET and vetAUDIT resources and they explore how different elements of these could be utilised in practice. The students apply their learning to their own practice contexts by identifying an area of their practice that they believe could be improved upon and conducting a literature review to find an evidence-based protocol, checklist or system of work that could be implemented in their practice. They then design a process or outcome audit that could be used to measure compliance or effectiveness of this. The students also collaborate to conduct a significant event audit and present the findings of their root cause analysis. The effect of practice culture on these types of activities is heavily discussed.

Results

The programme went live in 2017 and the PG Cert year was accredited to deliver the RCVS Certificate in Advanced Veterinary Nursing (CertAVN) in 2020. We have had 40 students enrol, and to date, four have graduated with a PG Cert, one a PG Diploma and five an MSc. The hope is that each student that completes the PG Cert year will go back to their practice and act as an advocate for QI and will motivate their teams to undertake QI initiatives.

As the programme is fully online, it attracts an international cohort, which provides a global perspective of QI in veterinary nursing. We have welcomed VNs from across the UK, Ireland, Malta, New Zealand, Australia, South Africa, Canada and the USA. Due to the diversity of the cohorts, our

students come from a range of backgrounds and experience, where some actively participate in QI activities, and other have never heard of the term. This diversity promotes lots of interesting discussion and collaboration between the student body which enhances everyone's learning experience. Many get inspiration from what their peers have done and examples of ideas that have been shared include patient handover and surgical checklists, hand washing process audits, journal clubs and CPD debriefings.

Most of our students work in clinical practice, so can take their learning immediately back to their workplaces. During the in-course discussions, many students describe the small changes they are already implementing within their practices, and our team is always excited to see how students are applying their learning. Feedback is collected at the end of each course and these are some examples from across the programme:

- *“EBVM is not a term I had heard of before the start of this course. I think it definitely has a place in the future of the profession and I think the work on the RCVS Knowledge site, in particular, is great, especially where vet nurses are also being asked to contribute to the knowledge base of the veterinary profession by encouragement to undertake Knowledge Summaries. “*
- *“Initially I knew the basics of reflective practice and had not heard of EBP until recently. The knowledge and skills I feel I have developed over the past 10 weeks have empowered me to use this to implement change and prepare for any barriers using some new techniques I have learned in the course...This has come at a brilliant time with the reflective change in CPD requirements. “*
- *“Though I have some partial involvement with auditing, there were other aspects I was more unfamiliar with, as to their processes, so I found this course to be very informative. I think this has particularly inspired me to look at positive use of SEAs as there is a reluctance to use these in my practice. I think this comes from an underlying feeling of blame (even though the working culture is supportive) which probably stems from lack of understanding. I would hope to look at encouraging others to use these, learning from the policies gleaned from their information and teaching the importance of using evidence-based practice.”*

Impact of Intervention

The PG Cert APVN programme is unique in that it focuses solely on topics that sit under the umbrella of QI rather than the traditional clinical aspects of practice. This is the first time that VNs have been able to learn about these topics in such depth at PG level and it is hoped that there will be real impact on those that have completed the programme. The external examiner, Andrea Jeffery, commented:

“Having been appointed [from] the start of this programme and therefore being able to see the skills and knowledge of the students developing in this area throughout the programme has been excellent. Their ability to use this education to reflect on their current practice and how this can be improved is a powerful mechanism for driving quality improvement in clinical practice”.

Several perceived impacts can be determined, with the first obvious one being that VNs will have the tools to implement robust QI methods in their practices. Students are asked to reflect upon their learning at the end of all courses, and the real-world application of the learning is often evident in their comments. As one student said:

“Over the past 10 weeks, I have developed a much deeper understanding of how teamwork, clinical auditing, regular meetings and an emphasis on communication can drastically improve patient and client outcomes, as well as the morale of a practice. I have a new appreciation for the power of a checklist, implementation of protocols and guidelines and the crucial step of auditing and re-auditing to measure quality of care.”

It is especially rewarding to introduce students to something that is, for some, a complete unknown. Watching the students gain confidence in their knowledge and skills to a point where they believe they can go on to implement change in their own practice reveals the level of impact it has on some. As one such student reflected:

“Prior to this module, I had little understanding of what clinical governance was, I had heard the term but did not think it was something that relevant to my own practice. I have never carried out audits within any of the practices I have worked in but feel like I would at least know how to make a start now with the information we have received within this module. I hadn’t realised that clinical governance was the analysis and development in professional practice that can benefit both our patient their owners and our profession as a whole. I found the information on M and M rounds interesting, in particular the focus on no blame culture. I definitely think that establishing a supportive workplace where people feel they can analyse problems without feeling blame is essential in clinical governance becoming commonplace in veterinary practices.”

The second clear impact of the programme is the role it is playing in educating the next generation of VN educators. I believe we are inspiring many of them to integrate QI-based learning and teaching within their own institutions. We have had approximately 10 students who work in the field of VN education, and many of these students have described how they are taking their learning and embedding it into their teaching practice, and some have already started to teach their own students about reflective practice, EBVN and QI. As one such educator commented:

“I have implemented a number of the topics we have discussed throughout the course with my own students and practice, and plan to do more in the future.”

There is also a wider educational impact as our students are encouraged and supported to publish their work. Several students have already done so in VN journals, and one has recently had their Knowledge Summary accepted for publication. This activity is helping to increase the evidence base for our profession.

The final impact going forward is that the PG Cert APVN is now a route for VNs to obtain the additional post-nominal, CertAVN. Being RCVS-accredited recognises the importance of QI within the VN profession as an advanced topic. Including the QI route rather than just a clinical route to the CertAVN addresses the need within the VN profession for a workforce with a varied skillset and hopefully opens opportunities for those individuals that have achieved these skills.

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